

Swimmable, fishable and drinkable?

Oldham's water quality is put to the test, and the results are surprising

By Danna Zabrovsky

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Oldham County has a water problem that residents can have a hand in fixing, according to engineers involved in the county's watershed plan.

After testing samples from a four-mile segment of the Curry's Fork watershed in 2006, the Kentucky Division of Water determined that portion of the watershed, which runs through Oldham County, is impaired by pathogens and sediment.

Older septic systems, erosion of the banks of streams and creeks, and the transition from farmland to a more urban landscape contribute to the impairment of the watershed, County Engineer Beth Stuber said.

In Jan. 2006, the Kentucky Division of Water awarded the county a \$1.6-million grant to develop and implement a watershed plan.

The grant includes \$900,000 in federal funds and a \$700,000 match by the county.

The plan is designed to study the county's waterways, determine what is right and wrong with them, identify solutions to water problems and implement those solutions.

A team from Salt River Basin, a non-governmental organization, helped residents collect water samples.

Scientists from Strand Associates, the Kentucky Division of Water, the University of Louisville and other organizations analyzed the samples, and determined that some parts of the watershed contain pathogens, Stuber said.

The Clean Water Act stipulates that streams should be swimmable, fishable and drinkable.

Stuber said our tap water is safe to drink and "if your kid wades into the stream, he's not going to get sick."

Drinking from a stream or swimming in a local pond for an extended period of time may not be so healthy, however.

Some of the areas in the county assumed to be impaired were not, she added.

"We were expecting Crystal Lake to be filthy, but it wasn't," Stuber said.

Water quality dropped around Interstate 71 exit 17 in Buckner, which is a densely populated area with septic and sewage issues, she said.

In general, it is difficult to tell just by looking at water if it is healthy or impaired, Stuber said. There are some signs of impairment, however.

Foam on the water surface could indicate a sewage problem, and an oily sheen on the water could be caused by film from detergents or sewage.

Litter could also impair the watershed because food waste disrupts the dissolved oxygen in the water, which fish need to survive.

Stuber cited the case of a collision in 2004 when a train struck a tractor-trailer in Buckner.

The tractor-trailer carried palletes of jarred salsa.

Stuber cites incidents like the salsa spill as a hazardous material situation, because the salsa could have contaminated the watershed and killed fish.

Fortunately, the salsa did not ooze its way into water, she said.

Paul Maron of Strand Associates, project manager for the watershed plan, said the health of a creek depends on the area around it.

"A lot of the issues in the Curry's Fork watershed can be improved by restoring the streamside buffer. This is the area immediately around the stream that in a natural state would have high grasses, trees, bushes, etc.," Maron wrote in an e-mail. "Unfortunately over time that buffer has been cleared away and the stream has lost this buffer that filters pollution and protects the integrity of the stream." Glen Barton, who has lived in Clarke Pointe subdivision in La Grange for seven years, said he used to see garbage in the creek in his neighborhood. Clarke Pointe is located in the South Curry's Fork sub-watershed, which scientists have labeled the least healthy part of the watershed due to a lack of trees.

Trees provide shade, which helps maintain oxygen levels in the water. Waste from farms and residential areas bleed into the sub-watershed, as well.

In the fall, residents of Clarke Pointe removed litter from the creek, which had dried up due to drought.

"You know how people are. They throw things in creeks, and it's out of sight, out of mind," Barton said.

He said the county road department came to improve the flow of the watershed and pick up dead trees that had fallen into the creek after a homeowner complained of flooding in a basement.

Children fish in the creek when there is enough water, he added.

"For the most part, our water doesn't look bad. It's clear," he said.

One solution to a damaged buffer zone is tree restoration, something Sherry and Robert Crouse of Meadowbrook Estates in La Grange started doing eight years ago.

Since the Crouses moved into their home on Meadowbrook Drive in La Grange 10 years ago, the stream in their backyard has changed course and trees have fallen down along the street that runs over it.

It is about six feet wide and has water in it about two-thirds of the year, Robert said.

On one occasion their backyard was swamped by a flash flood, and the Crouses could smell sewage, Robert said.

"But that was a one-time deal," Sherry said. "It looks like a healthy creek."

And compared to the rest of the watershed the creek is healthy.

The Crouses live in North Curry's Fork, which has the highest nutrient levels and average waste discharge problems for the four sub-watersheds.

Sherry said she and her husband ordered about 200 trees, including maples, red buds and poplars, from a state program.

Maron said other ways of improving conditions in Curry's Fork include replanting stream banks and not mowing all the way to the water if you have a creek or stream on your property.

Rain gardens, permeable pavement and asphalt promote infiltration, which means that water seeps into the ground instead of rolling into streams, collecting waste as it goes.

Residents can collect water in rain barrels and use it to wash their cars this spring and summer, a process which helps manage oxygen levels in streams.

Several initiatives by the Oldham County Environmental Authority, such as eliminating small treatment plants, enhanced storm water management, and septic system education for homeowners, will also lead to significant improvements in the health of the watershed,